

Chapter Eight:

Purpose and Tone

There is an **author**—a person with thoughts, feelings, and opinions—behind everything you read.

Authors write from a **personal point of view**.

That point of view is reflected in

- the **purpose** of a piece of writing—to inform, to persuade, or to entertain—and
- its **tone**: the expression of attitude and feeling.

The **purpose** of the cartoon below, like all cartoons, is to entertain.

Can you tell what the **tone** of each speaker is?

Which speaker is sincere in what he says? Which one is insincere?



The boss is insincere.

If he decided to fire the worker, he most likely is **not** sorry. He doesn't know if the worker will "land on his feet" and find another job.

The worker, on the other hand, is sincere.

He is angry at being fired and wishes that he could stomp on his ex-boss's chest.



Purpose

The author's reason for writing is called the **purpose** of a selection.

Three common purposes for writing:

To **inform**—to give information about a subject.

Example: "Eating food between two slices of bread—a sandwich—is a practice that has its origins in eighteenth-century England."

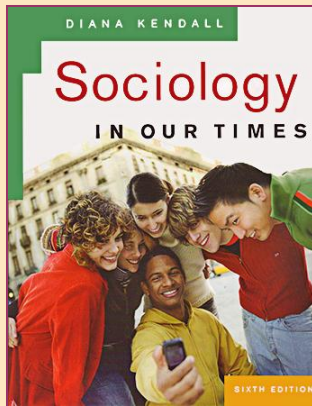
To **persuade**—to convince the reader to agree with the author's point of view on a subject.

Example: "There are good reasons why every sandwich should be made with whole-grain bread."

To **entertain**—to amuse and delight; to appeal to the reader's senses and imagination.

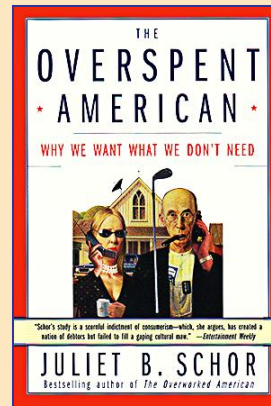
Example: "What I wanted was a midnight snack, but what I got was better—the biggest, most magical sandwich in the entire world."

Can you figure out the primary purpose of each of these books?



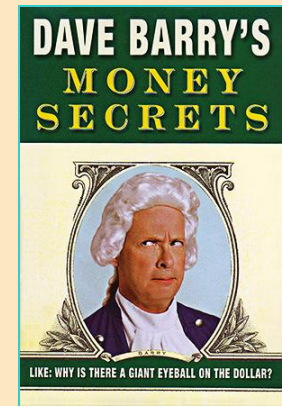
Primary purpose:

- A.** to inform
- B.** to persuade
- C.** to entertain



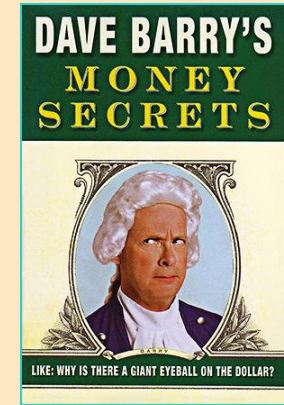
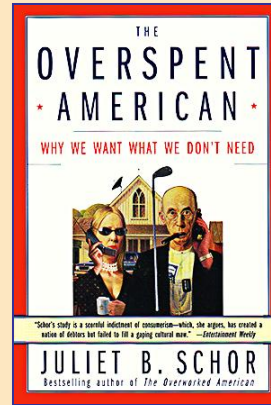
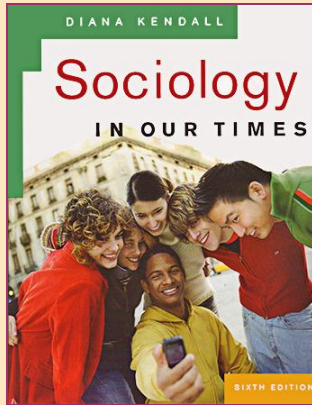
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As you probably concluded, the main purpose of the textbook (*Sociology in Our Times*) is to **inform**.

The main purpose of *The Overspent American* is to **persuade**.

The main purpose of *Dave Barry's Money Secrets* is to **entertain**.

Tone

A writer's **tone** reveals the attitude he or she has toward a subject.

Tone is expressed through the words and details the writer selects. Just as a speaker's voice can project a range of feelings, a writer's voice can project one or more tones: anger, sympathy, hopefulness, sadness, respect, dislike, and so on.

Understanding tone is, then, an important part of understanding what an author has written.

Here are four different versions of a murder confession.

To appreciate the differences in tone that writers can use, read them aloud—in the **tone of voice** appropriate in each case.

“I just shot my husband five times in the chest with this .357 Magnum.”
(**Tone:** matter-of-fact, objective.)

“How could I ever have *killed* him? I just *can’t believe* I did that!”
(**Tone:** shocked, disbelieving.)

“Oh, my God. I’ve murdered my husband. How can I *ever* be forgiven for this dreadful deed?”
(**Tone:** guilty, regretful.)

“That dirty rat. He’s had it coming for years. I’m glad I finally had the nerve to do it.”
(**Tone:** revengeful, self-satisfied.)

Words That Describe Tone

Below and on the next two screens are some words commonly used to describe tone.

Except for *matter-of-fact* and *objective*, each word reflects a **feeling** or **judgment**.

admiring	cruel	loving
affectionate	curious	playful
amused	defensive	praising
angry	doubtful	respectful
apologetic	encouraging	self-pitying
ashamed	excited	serious
calming	forgiving	sorrowful
caring	frightened	sympathetic
cheerful	grateful	threatening
conceited	humorous	tragic
concerned	insulting	warm
critical	joyous	worried

More words that describe tone—with their meanings:

ambivalent	uncertain about a choice
arrogant	full of self importance; conceited
bewildered	confused; puzzled
bitter	angry; full of hate
compassionate	deeply sympathetic
depressed	sad or discouraged
detached	emotionally uninvolved
disbelieving	unbelieving
distressed	suffering sorrow; misery or pain
hypocritical	false
impassioned	filled with strong feeling
indignant	angry about something unfair or mean
instructive	teaching
ironic	meaning the opposite of what is expressed
lighthearted	happy and carefree
matter-of-fact	sticking to the facts
mocking	making fun of and/or looking down upon something
nostalgic	longing for something or someone in the past

Still more words that describe tone—with their meanings:

objective	not influenced by feelings or personal prejudices
optimistic	looking on the bright side of things
pessimistic	looking on the gloomy, unfavorable side of things
pleading	begging
prideful	full of pride or exaggerated self-esteem
remorseful	guilty over a wrong one has done
revengeful	wanting to hurt someone in return for an injury
sarcastic	sharp or wounding; ironic
scheming	tricky
scornful	looking down on something or someone
self-mocking	making fun of or looking down on oneself
sentimental	showing tender feelings; romantic; overly emotional
solemn	involved with serious concerns
straightforward	direct and honest
superior	looking down on others
tolerant	respectful of other views and behavior; patient about problems
uncertain	doubting

A Note on Irony

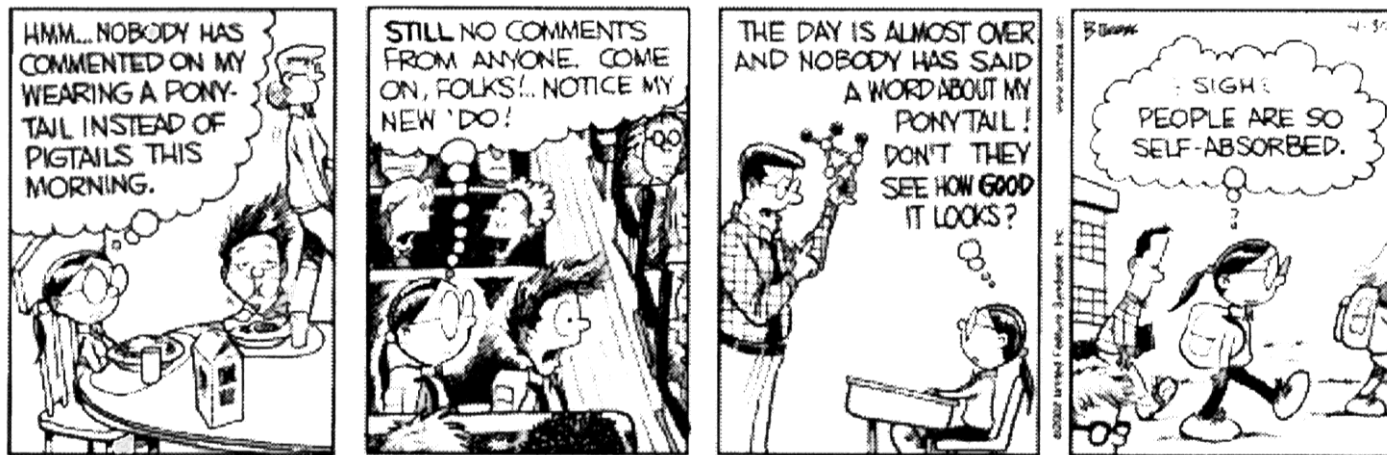
One commonly used tone—in conversation as well as in writing—is **irony**.

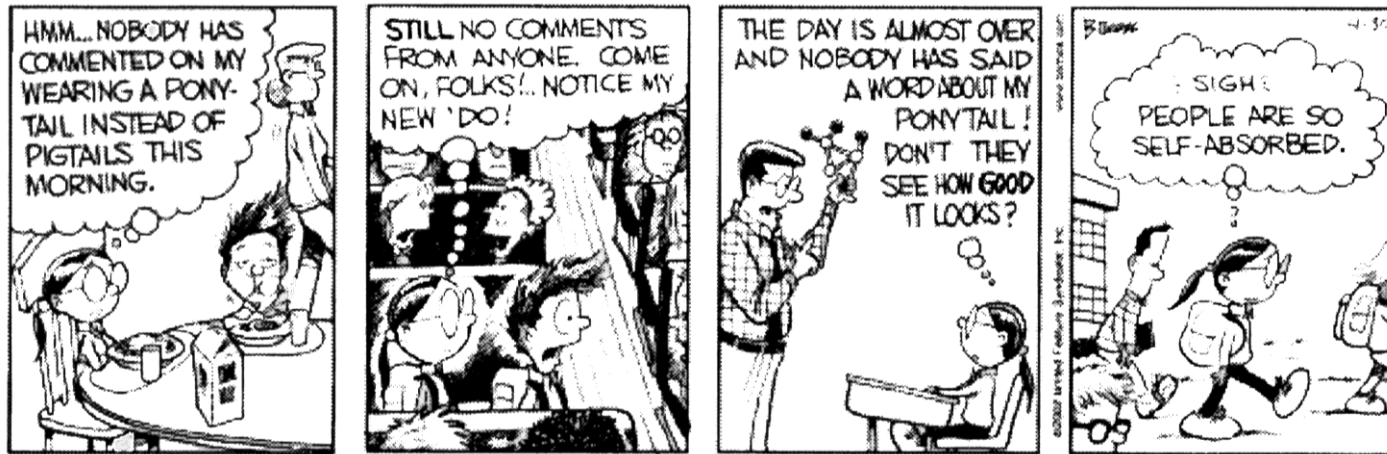
When writing has an **ironic** tone, it says one thing but means the opposite.

- After seeing a terrible performance in a movie, someone might say about the actor involved, “Now there’s a person with a great chance for an Oscar.”
- While standing in a long, slow line at a supermarket or bank, you might say to people in line with you, “My, this is exciting.”
- If a friend arrives at your place two hours late, you might say, “Well, thanks for showing up on time.”
- If you’re suffering from the flu and someone asks how you feel, you might say: “I feel terrific today.”

In each example, what the person says is the **opposite** of what is meant.

What is the irony in the cartoon below?





The **irony** in the little girl's comment that "People are all so self-absorbed" is that **she herself is self-absorbed**.

All she seems to care about is whether people will notice her ponytail.

Chapter Review

In this chapter, you learned that part of effective reading is to do the following:

- Be aware of an author's **purpose**: the reason why he or she writes. Three common purposes are to **inform**, to **persuade**, and to **entertain**.
- Be aware of **tone**: the expression of the author's attitude and feeling about a subject. A writer's tone might be objective—the case in most textbook writing—or it might be lighthearted, sympathetic, angry, affectionate, respectful, or any of many other tones shown on pages 326-327 of the book.
- One important tone to recognize is **irony**: saying one thing but meaning the opposite.

The next chapter—Chapter 9—will explain another part of effective reading: recognizing the point in an argument and evaluating the support for that point.